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There is a need to ascertain ways and means whereby improvements may be initiated in present and future educational programs for the Native people of Alaska. The present situation indicates that because of the dropout rate from secondary schools and the low academic success of those in college, educators in Alaska have failed to cope with the problems of linguistics and culture of the Alaskan Native. Regional high schools which meet the needs of the rural people of Alaska seem to be an answer to the geographic problem. Other steps toward solution include: (1) establishing Head Start classes; (2) having local people teach at the pre-school level; (3) continuing teacher-aid training program as well as teachers' assistants and teachers' associates; (4) changing the educational curriculum to meet the needs of the village children; and (5) involving Native leaders in the conception of an over-all educational plan for rural Alaska. By improving the education system, the economic and industrial situations will also develop. A brief review of the history of education in Alaska, dating from the Russian occupation to the present is contained. (CM)

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A STUDY OF PROBLEMS IN EDUCATION OF
THE NATIVE PEOPLE OF ALASKA

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A paper submitted to the Alaska Federation of Natives in
support of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement.

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A STUDY OF PROBLEMS IN EDUCATION OF
THE NATIVE PEOPLE OF ALASKA

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE FOR THE STUDY

This study was designed to review the educational programs past, present and future for the Native people of Alaska and to ascertain ways and means whereby improvements may be initiated.

NEED FOR THE STUDY

There was a need for a clear-cut understanding of the responsibility of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the State Department of Education and the University of Alaska concerning the educational programs for the Native people of Alaska.

When the question was put to the above agencies the answer most often heard in return is that there was lack of funds to do a proper job.

Through the use of outside funds such as might be available through the Native Land Claims Bill it is hoped that the Native people themselves might participate in the efforts towards improvements in educational programs, both formal and general.

CHAPTER II

ACADEMIC STUDIES ON ALASKAN EDUCATION

Poole¹ divided the history of education in Alaska into six periods. The first period was identified with the Russian occupation of Alaska. The second period began with the purchase of Alaska from Russia by the United States to 1884 when the Secretary of the Interior became responsible for education in the Territory. The third period was closely related to the time when the United States Government established schools and contracted with the mission schools for their administration. This period covered from 1884 to 1894. The fourth period dealt with the time when a separate school system was established for white children and the children of mixed blood parentage. This period covered from 1894 to 1905. The fifth period included the time when the schools for the Natives were transferred from the Bureau of Education to the Office of Indian Affairs. This period dealt with the time when the complete cycle of education from kindergarten through college was established. This period covered from 1931 to 1968.

There has been very little change in the actual philosophy of education for the Native people of Alaska since 1884. We still have segregated schools.

One point that needs mentioning in connection with the Russian period is that the Russian taught in two languages, Russian and Native.

The professional and social problems of teacher personnel in the Territory of Alaska were studied in four eras of education in Alaska by Cumming². These four periods were: The Russian Period, 1784-1867; the Mission Period, 1867-1885; the Government Period, 1885-1917; and the Territorial Period, 1917-1955.

¹Charles P. Poole, "Two Centuries of Education in Alaska" (unpublished Doctor's thesis, University of Washington, Seattle, 1948), pp.253-258.

²John Ross Cummings, "Survey of Teachers Status and Comparative Analysis of the Professional and Social Problems of Teacher Personnel in the Territory of Alaska" (unpublished Doctor's thesis, the University of Washington, Seattle, 1955), pp. 70-102.

During the Russian Period a trained teacher was an exception. The Russian American Company, which controlled the economic life of the Russian colonies in the New World, operated the schools for Natives and Creoles mainly to further the work of the company. Just about any person that was interested in teaching was allowed to teach. By far the best teacher was the priest of the Russian Greek Orthodox Church.³

During the Mission Period teachers came from communities in the eastern portion of the United States. These teachers were sent by the mission boards of the various denominations. It was these people who brought the first professional education to the Territory. The American missionaries formed the nucleus of Government Schools established from 1885 to 1900. Certificated teachers in Alaska became a reality with the establishment of the Territorial Department of Education in 1917. From that date to the present, there was a constant struggle to obtain professionally trained personnel who had also the personal and social qualifications to deal with the manifold educational problems of isolated and pioneer communities in the territory.⁴

During the Russian Period, due to the few qualified teachers in the Russian colonies and the lack of adequate educational facilities, the professional activities of teacher personnel were limited. The largely Native school population with a culture wholly unrelated to that of western civilization, and unable to read or speak the language of the teachers, made instruction difficult. The American missions established the first school programs of a professional type, with emphasis on language instruction. As these schools were few, the teacher pupil load was so great that double shift programs were often in use.⁵

Again a disservice to the Native people during this period was that the professional teacher did not teach in the language of the community. The pupils were expected to learn a new language along with new concepts based on the new language. Concepts and language of the home were totally different from the concepts and language of the school. This has been the downfall of the educational system in Alaska for one hundred years.

³Ibid., pp. 70-76

⁴Ibid., pp. 76-102

⁵Ibid., pp. 146-260

There has been a large percentage of teacher turnover in rural Alaska compared to the teacher turnover in the urban centers. Overstreet⁶ undertook his research for the purpose of determining what factors contributed to teacher turnover in Alaska. Some of the reasons given by the teachers in the rural schools were isolation, dissatisfaction with community, inadequate housing, inadequate salary, limited opportunity for advancement, and dissatisfaction with school facilities.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs teachers gave as their main reasons for leaving their positions: limited opportunity for advancement, the high pupil teacher ratio, dissatisfaction with the principal, poor salary, and isolation.⁷

This all points to the need of training our own Native people to teach in the rural schools of Alaska. We feel that with the use of Native teachers in the rural schools of Alaska the high percentage of teacher turnover will be greatly reduced.

Herreid⁸ observed that the Alaskan Native home background was significantly different in terms of education and occupation than the home background of the non-native. Much higher percentage of the non-native students came from the "professional" occupation home background than did the Native student.

An analysis of the Native students' academic success at the University and their American College Testing Program examination predictions for success suggest that many Native students who attend the University of Alaska should not. When the 1962 freshman were compared to see what percent were enrolled for a fourth consecutive semester at the University, 23 percent of the Natives and 49 percent

⁶William Dean Overstreet, "A Survey and Analysis of the Reasons Teachers Gave for Leaving Their Positions in Alaska in 1960" (unpublished Master's thesis, the University of Washington, Seattle, 1960), p. 44.

⁷Loc. cit.

⁸Janet Herreid, "Alaskan Natives at the University of Alaska" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Alaska, College, 1964) pp. 68-70.

of the non-natives were present. Of the two groups, 46.2 percent of the Natives and 20 percent of the non-natives had been academically disqualified.

The study by Herreid indicates that the educators in Alaska have not seriously coped with the problems of linguistics and culture of the Alaskan Native.

CHAPTER III

PROBLEMS OF GEOGRAPHY

During the school year 1917-18 the Commissioner of Education of Alaska had to travel 11,000 miles to reach 48 schools and six districts. In 1934 he was able to contact school officials in 49 schools by traveling 6,220 miles in 49 days. Half of the travel in 1934 was by an airplane. A wide distribution of population, combined with the topographic and climatic conditions in Alaska made the organization, administration and supervision of the largest school district in the United States a difficult problem.⁹

The rural schools of Alaska - not including the schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs - covered such a large area geographically that it spanned four time zones and included 116 schools, with an enrollment ranging from 8 to 2,300 students in 1960. Explaining the tremendous size of the administrative area one still could not tell the whole story. In Alaska, only a relatively few schools were connected by highways, and fewer still were reached by railroad.¹⁰

Geographic problem is one of the reasons why we feel that Alaska must provide regional high schools to meet the needs of the rural people of Alaska.

⁹ Lloyd E. Blauch and Charles F. Reid, PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE TERRITORIES AND OUTLYING POSSESSIONS, Staff Study Number 16, Prepared for the Advisory Committees on Education (Washington, D.C., United Printing Office, 1939), p. 34.

¹⁰ T.F. Borden, "Largest School District in the United States," NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION JOURNAL, 50:64, March, 1961.

CHAPTER IV

ALASKA NATIVE HIGH SCHOOL "DROP OUT"

A research report published by the University of Alaska and directed by Charles K. Ray gave the following summary of major findings:¹¹

(1) Only 34 percent of Alaska's 5368 youth of high school age (fourteen to nineteen years) is actually enrolled in secondary school.

(2) Losses as high as 60 percent of the total class enrollment were found in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools when the student population was traced from grade one through eight.

(3) Over-age students drop out of school with considerable greater frequency than those who are near normal grade placement. A study of elementary school dropouts in the Bureau of Indian Affairs schools showed that of 760 drop outs included in the survey, only one (1) percent was at normal grade placement, while approximately half had been retarded five or more years.

(4) Promotion and retention practices are often based on unrealistic standards developed for Caucasian, middle-class, English-speaking youth and do not take into account the background of the particular group being taught.

(5) Class size in a number of schools is excessive. Particularly when a teacher is teaching in a multi-grade situation, the presence of forty to forty-five students representing a number of different grades in one room presents a formidable barrier to good teaching.

(6) Because of the enormous number of Native students who do not complete the eighth grade, the secondary school population becomes a screened or selected group--making even more serious the large proportion of students who leave high school prior to graduation.

¹¹ Charles K. Ray and others, ALASKAN NATIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL DROP-OUTS, A study made for the U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education and Welfare (University of Alaska, 1962).

(7) Lack of high school facilities presents a major obstacle to attaining the goal of universal education through the secondary school. Applications from qualified students who wish to attend high school are rejected because of space limitations. Since parents are reluctant to have their children leave home to attend school, the absence of local high schools deters many students from seeking education beyond the elementary level.

(8) Little relationship is seen by pupils or parents between school curriculum and their village life. Parents do not understand what the school purports to do, nor can they perceive the value education will have in helping children to become economically independent. Beyond the fact that the children learn reading and writing-tasks which parents consider important--the aims of the schools are not comprehended and hence not fully supported. Conversely, education is sometimes perceived as a disruptive force causing the children who leave for high school to become "different" and dissatisfied when they return to the village.

(9) Economic gain is the primary motive for attending school. The fact that no connection can be seen between education and the ability to earn contributes to early dropout. Because the student is interested in learning to work, he often leaves school to engage in such tasks as wood-gathering, hunting, and fishing, where he determines that his practical learning is valuable

(10) Inadequate knowledge of job requirements for particular professions causes students and parents to have vague and distorted notions of how one prepares for a certain vocation. On the one hand, a naive faith is held that a high school education will guarantee respectable employment. The return to the village of unemployable high school graduates causes disillusionment. Conversely, information about jobs for which students might realistically prepare is not available; consequently, students often conclude erroneously that gainful employment is beyond their reach.

(11) School personnel possess an inadequate knowledge of the values held by groups with whom they work.

(12) Health problems contribute to dropout as incidence of tuberculosis is comparatively high and the incidence of residual defects such as marginal sight and hearing often go untreated until the child's grade retardation is too great for correction.

(13) Difficulties in adjusting to life away from home were encountered by those students who did not complete boarding high school.

CHAPTER V

STEPS TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

The following steps should be taken immediately by those charged with the responsibility of educating the Alaskan Native, and given the opportunity through the Native Land Claims settlement the Native people will make it their business to see that some funds are made available for improved educational programs for the Alaskan Natives and non-natives alike. We propose:

(1) That early childhood educational programs be made available to all communities in Alaska desiring such a program. Head Start classes have been operated successfully for two years in 52 Native villages. There are over 200 villages desiring same. We recommend that the local Native language be fully utilized in the pre-school program.

(2) That priority be given to the local people to teach on the pre-school level. This has been proven successful in the Head Start Program. The local person more fully understands and appreciates the linguistic and cultural heritage of the village.

(3) That there be a continued operation of the teacher-aid training program by the Anchorage Community College to prepare helpers in the elementary classroom. This program has been co-sponsored by the B.I.A. and Manpower Development Training Agency. Head Start Teacher Training Program was also conducted by the same administration with funds provided by O.E.O.

(4) Immediate consideration should be given a plan to expand the program by including, in addition to the "Aide" training as offered previously, two additional steps for teachers' "Assistants" and teachers' "Associates."

More advanced training for them would meet the expressed needs of a number of Alaskan teacher aides. It would represent a realistic beginning for some who wish to become teachers but who could not now enroll in a continuous baccalarureate program.

Among educational institutions in the United States which have responded to a similar aide-inspired need is St. Petersburg Junior College in Florida, which offers a one-year terminal career program for teachers' "Aides."

(5) That changes be made in the educational curriculum so that a youngster on the village level may be offered formal education through the tenth grade. This will allow the child to be with his parents for a longer period during his educational career. Many children and parents are psychologically upset by having to separate nine months out of the year. Many family units are disturbed to the point of "non-return" during these absent periods.

(6) That regional high schools with two years of post high school years be made available in the following areas: Aleutian Islands, Bristol Bay, Bethel, Kotzebue, Barrow, Galena, Fort Yukon, Southeastern (Mt. Edgecombe) and Tok. This will allow students to go home for occasional visits or parents to visit at the school. This will make secondary education more obtainable for those who would ordinarily drop out because of family and geographic problems. The two years beyond the high school will permit those students who are not college bound to train in the fields appropriate to the regional area such as electronics, heavy equipment operation and maintenance, building skills, fisheries, etc. This would also permit those who are college bound to receive credits transferable to the college of their choice.

With this program we will see less and less academic failures among our Native people.

(7) All available funds, State, Federal or private, should be concentrated in the rural Alaska for adult education. We have seen some programs such as M.D.T.A., O.E.O., B.I.A. and O.J.T., but there needs to be more of the same. We feel that there must be industrial development in the rural areas of Alaska and that the adult education programs be directly related to such development. We see this as means of providing a more productive worker but also a means of a more enlightened citizen.

(8) That the federal funds now available for the education of Native children be turned over to the State Department of Education for the purpose of having one administrator in education for all Native children in Alaska. This move will save administrative costs by eliminating duplications in job positions. This

would also put all rural Alaskan teachers on the same footing as far as salary, retirement, travel allowance, academic requirements and vacation are concerned. This will also do away with the segregated educational system in Alaska. We feel that the state is just as much to blame for this problem as the federal government. This move must be "immediate" not "gradual."

(9) We propose a regional school board for the areas which will be served by a regional high school. This is not just an advisory concept. This move will give the rural people the notion that the schools are their schools. There will be more responsibility, concern and interest.

(10) That the Native leaders be involved fully in the conception of an over-all educational plan for rural Alaska. In the past the Native people have not been consulted in the development of an educational plan for them. Demonstration in Navajo education at Rough Rock, Arizona has proven that given the opportunity even the academically deprived people will make the right choices.¹² The Native people have a right to make a few mistakes too. "After all" is not this the way of democracy?

¹²Estelle Fuchs, "Innovation at Rough Rock" Saturday Review, September 16, 1967.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The number one problem in the Native education is the separation that has been demanded between the child, family, and community. If this practice is permitted to continue we will negate the whole educational process. We must adhere to the concept of the community school. We must demand and allow participation from the Native people in all aspects of the educational process. The community must feel that it too is educating the child and to accept this transmission there must be both bilingualism and cultural pluralism.

When we mute a child's first language we are destroying the system by which the Native child thinks and expresses his concepts and intelligence. The Native child and the white child are supposed to compete in learning. The white child churns ahead in an undisturbed cognitive linguistic system. The Native child must hold up significant cognition until he learns the master communication system, English. This is one of the main reasons why our Native students are having a major "drop out" problem on the University level.

The schools in Greenland faced this problem many years ago. They taught the Eskimo in his own language for the primary grades of his school career then the Danish language was introduced in the fourth year. The Greenland educational program is considered successful by many United States educators.

There is still a further value in the Native tongue and that is that it keeps the personality in a functioning whole and allows for an improved self identity. One other minor contribution of the native tongue would be that it contributes towards more internalization and educational reasoning. In this case language is considered as culture.

As we examine the record more and more evidence turns up that quite functionally the child with a whole culture has a greater chance of retaining a whole personality than a child from a lost or fractured culture, and an effective person operates out of a highly organized sense of self.

Finally, education for education sake is not enough. Economic and industrial development must go hand in hand with the education process. At one time in history the Native people of Alaska enjoyed a meaningful livelihood in their own Native culture. Since the coming of the Russian fur traders the Native people have been exposed and educated in the western culture or what we might refer to today as the dominant American culture. We must provide some means whereby a decent adjustment may be made to this new culture without the psychological damage to the personality of the Native people. Now there must be not only the formal education but the means, through economic and industrial development in the Native country, for a new meaningful livelihood.

This we hope to help achieve with the Alaska Native Land Claims settlement.

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